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ABSTRACT

An ethnographic study examined illiterates and their understanding of literacy. The theoretical background of the study is based on the thesis of "contemporary orality": that India is a fundamentally oral culture that retains all the characteristics of primary orality (Walter Ong's term) through the use of speech as the dominant medium of communication. Twelve subjects from Delhi, India were interviewed to determine their organization and application of knowledge. Results indicated that the illiterates find: (1) knowledge as synonymous with being skillful; (2) knowledge as interactional versus manual; and (3) knowledge as hierarchical versus egalitarian. Results also indicated that the subjects believe that literacy increases social inequality in the sense that literates create hierarchies of intelligence that lead to unequal social relationships between literates and illiterates. Rethinking the role of literacy is an issue that communication scholars need to address. (RS)

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Contemporary Orality: A New Theory for Understanding Speech

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This is an ethnographic study about illiterates and their understanding of literacy. Twelve subjects from Delhi, India were interviewed to determine their organization and application of knowledge. The results indicate that the illiterates find knowledge as synonymous with being skillful, knowledge as interactional versus manual and knowledge as hierarchical versus egalitarian. Contemporary orality is introduced as a new theory for understanding the mechanics of the oral mind. The findings evolved from the theoretical tradition of hermeneutics and studies on oral consciousness.

This research was conducted as a field study to answer some of the questions that illiteracy generated. Of those, the most obvious question that literates often encounter: what is knowledge or known to an individual who cannot read or write? The answer is simple: Knowledge has a totally different form and structure. This may come as a surprise to most of us who are confortable in the notion of textual knowledge. Knowledge is often defined as an abstract concept that we easily discuss, refer to and debate. In fact, every person has some degree of conscious knowledge that he uses in structuring his social relations.

Theoretically, this statement is accurate. We have, as text-users, created the linguistic sense of knowledge. It gives a definitive meaning and shape to our ideas and gives the text a material representative need to exist. Yet, knowledge has to extend beyond the realm of that which is written or printed to that which is spoken. Thus, we must seek the presence of knowledge in speech. This absence of knowledge is not its disappearance from human consciousness. Rather, it is the absence of any spatial representation of knowledge. This brings us to the most difficult aspect of this study: to understand consciousness through ambiguities and in the absence of anything concrete. This study began as an effort to cultivate a set of categories that could be deduced from an illiterate consciousness that is constructed by the notion of speech. It was not an effort to look for pre-examined differences between literates and illiterates. Rather it was the search for new and revealing roots to human understanding and human interpreta-

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tion. The most fundamental question this research addresses is that involving illiterates' view of themselves in relation to the literates.

India as a nation provides the best backdrop to study illiteracy for three primary reasons: (a) it has a high population of people who cannot read or write; (b) the low literacy rate has kept a rich tradition of oral culture intact and (c) the researcher's prior linguistic and religious knowledge of the region. The researcher selected the old city of Delhi as the site to conduct a series of interviews with illiterate men and women.

The situation of illiterates and the environment they live in is visibly sub-standard. Illiteracy has been contextualized, in the Indian culture, as the absence of literacy or a cultural tool that can improve who you are or who you can be. Literates have decided on the role of "opinion leaders" - unfortunately eulogized in writings of Arvind Singhal and Everett Rogers (1989) - and societal guides. They define the terminology of being Indian or of Indian-ness. This dominance is evident in the number of bonded laborers in India today. Their population exceeds 6 million. They also indicate the important social role that literacy plays. The whole system of bonded laborers (or *Bandhua Majdoors* as they are referred to in the cities and villages) works simply. A peasant who does not own any land can work as a cultivator or a crop-gatherer with some of the landowners. They in turn give him either a weekly salary of a few rupees (the Indian currency) or a few bags of grain. Soon enough, the high cost of living gets the better of the laborer's spending. He or she decides to borrow some money or grain from the landowner who, in turn, exploits the situation by turning this laborer from a paid to a bonded laborer. The difference in the status is drastic. As a paid laborer one can quit or change jobs and work with different landowners. One also has the freedom to choose the nature of the job, i.e., if s/he wants to work as a cultivator, pesticide-sprayer, or cleaner. But after becoming a bonded laborer, all these choices are immediately curtailed. The landowner who loans the money becomes the singular person who decides on the laborer's future movements.

The process of becoming a bonded laborer is characteristic of Indian society - he is "told" that from today on, until he repays the loan with interest, he will remain a bonded laborer. There is never any signing of written documents because most of these laborers do not know how to read or write. On few occasions, the landowner takes the thumb-print of the laborers on a piece of blank paper. This is often to certify that the latter has borrowed a certain amount of money from the former. However, historically, the landowners lie about the amount of money laborers owe them by writing an exaggerated amount after the peasant had been thumb-printed. Interestingly, in a law passed by the government of India almost twenty years ago, bonded laborers were set free. This has had hardly any effect on the situation. The laborers were convinced that legal authority belonged to the landowners and their obligation lay with the person who

had bonded them. Further, with no personal possessions or no manual or linguistic skills, they could not move far beyond the social position or geographic area that they were in. The question of escape, therefore, became meaningless.

Here I must mention the theoretical background on which part of this study is based. This work was influenced by Walter J. Ong's (1982) studies on primary, secondary and residual orality. Most researchers before Ong had concentrated on the psychological necessity connected to the nature of speech. Rarely was communicative dynamics of literacy attached to the analysis of a culture. Even in later anthropology and ethnographic studies (eg., Clifford Geertz, 1973) the research was based on an inclination to look for a sense of self as separate from consciousness formation. Ong, on the other hand, had a very specific agenda that included writing (or literacy) as a communicative moment that (a) changed the psychodynamics of the oral mind and (b) created its own cultural variables.

There is a marked difference in the nature of orality that this research studies in comparison to the orality that Ong mentions. In the introduction of his book *Orality and Literacy* he says, "In recent years certain basic differences have been discovered between the ways of managing knowledge and verbalization in primary oral cultures (cultures with no knowledge at all of writing) and in cultures deeply affected by the use of writing." (p. 1) The oral culture that this paper studies is different from either of the aforementioned definitions.

In introducing the thesis of *Contemporary Orality*, I deviate from the definitions of the oral cultures that Ong is concerned with. Contemporary oral cultures are not primary if "primary" refers to the culture with no knowledge of writing at all. India, where the research subjects of this study come from, has a growing number of literates and literate professionals who attend educational instututes. The cultural and social construction is based largely on the success of this literate class. But, unlike Western nations, it is not as deeply affected by the nature of writing. Hartmann, Patil and Dighe (1989) found in their research on India that the oral traditions of myth, story-telling, theatre and drama still constitute the basic cultural core. Contemporary orality is a fundamentally oral culture that retains all the characteristics of primary orality through the use of speech as the dominant medium of communication. It acknowledges the presence of other media but the construction of cultural codes is bound to that which is spoken.

This study also gained an extensive amount of research material from A. R. Luria's (1976, 1980) work on oral consciousness. These works clearly mark a beginning point for reconsideration of ways we define illiteracy. Luria's subjects, like many in this study, reconstitute knowledge as situational rather than abstract. Questions of correctness and exactness trouble Luria's subjects, like the subjects in this study, who minimize abstractions

by bringing these measurements to their immediate application to practical situations.

Illiterates in Indian society are not all bonded laborers. They have various other professions, for example: they work as domestics, maids, cleaners, petty salespersons, and vegetable vendors. The 12 subjects interviewed predominantly from this background. To give a few examples of some of the subjects:

(1) Nala: She is in her late teens and works as a maid in several private homes. Her job description includes cleaning the house, sweeping floors and carpets, dusting the furniture and washing dishes. She also does the laundry in a few homes.

(2) Bhai: He is a scribe. One of the people with most interesting professions, Bhai paints large-size display boards. These boards include advertisements of recent films, consumer products and political statements and are often seen on busy street-corners or bazaars. Like a folk-artist, he scribes beautifully but cannot read any of what he writes.

(3) Kanha: He is older, around 50 years, and works as a vegetable seller. He does not own land and cannot grow his own vegetables. He buys vegetables from the government stores which sells them to him at a subsidized rate. He, in turn, goes to private homes and sells the vegetables at a small profit.

Questions concerning knowledge have an important role in an illiterate's life. Let me focus on the individual definitions that can be extracted. I began by asking them if they had any *gyana*. The word gyana has its etymological roots in sanskrit and literary means "to know," "knowing," or being "acquainted with." However, in recent linguistic usage it has come to be associated with abstractions of a theory. To an illiterate, knowledge and skill or *Kaam* are interchangeable terms. None of the subjects could distinguish or separate the two at any level of understanding. Knowledge could not be defined in any other terms besides the application of human labor and in the construction of something specific or concrete. For example, knowledge to Nala is sweeping the floors clean; knowledge to Kanha is selling the maximum number of vegetables he can in a day.

In its entirety, the concept of skill has two important aspects that needs to be stressed. At the fundamental level, one form of skill is manual and therefore provides for the physiological needs. For instance, Nala sells her expertise to sweep the floors, demanding a certain amount of money in return for her services. This adds to her family income, which is about $50 a month, and provides for rice and lentil. Clearly, this knowledge is important to her since it fulfils the basic needs of existence. Rightly she asks the researcher, "How can I live if I am not a maid?" (and living here is synonymous with biological survival)

Closely related to this notion was the other aspect of skill that most illiterates reiterated in their efforts to describe the importance of knowl-

edge. In answer to the question, "What is the most important work for you?" (the question was phrased in such a way as to combine both the terms, skill and work, in one word - *Kaam*, literary meaning "to perform," "to work" or "to be skillful"), most of the subjects greatly emphasized on their interactional skills. An example:

Kanha: For me the most important work is to make more and more friends; share their love [love is used here more as a sense of compassion]; be with them; talk to them always.

Stress is laid on building a network of human relationships through interactional skills. Thus, skill or knowledge takes on two distinct paths - different but dependent - of knowledge as a way of satisfying physiological needs and knowledge as primarily interactional. The interpretation of this distinction is implicit in the following conversation:

Chowki: Housework is housework. Fieldwork is fieldwork.

Researcher: Are these different?

Chowki: Oh, yes. Housework is looking after *bibi* [wife] and making bread for my brother. Fieldwork is what I do at the construction site. I cannot bring that work home, can I?

Researcher: But how are they different?

Chowki: Now you are doing fieldwork. You will not take this home with you. At home you probably spent time talking to your parents. You will not go home and tell them you spent time with Chowki. Same way I don't go home and tell bibi I talked with the contractor. Housework gives us happiness, fieldwork gives us an income.

Here Chowki, who works as a night watchman, is convinced of the dual role that knowledge plays in his life. Housework requires interactional skills and revolves around his relationship with others. A powerful need exists in this sphere for a private self (as separate from a more public self). Fieldwork, on the other hand, requires a skill that is primarily manual. It is a source of satisfying the immediate economical needs of his family. In the field Chowki does not feel that the interactional skills play as important a role. However, he is extremely careful to pointing out the fact that fieldwork gives him the income he needs to keep his family happy. Thus, the distinction of skills consciously functions at least two levels of action.

The other vital point in the construction of knowledge is a deep sense of skills as hierarchical. This hierarchy acts on two levels: (a) as an economic indicator and (b) as an evaluative scale. The following example explores the first point.

Bhai: If I could read or write I would really be rich. After all, everyone who can read and write is rich. If my parents had sent me to school, I would have a bicycle and a radio by now.

From the above quote one can draw an equation between a better economic condition (symbolically expressed in the ownership of a bicycle and a radio) with knowing how to read and write. Most illiterates presuppose that all literates are economically well-off because literacy provides them with a special skill unknown to them. These skills help literates to understand the workings of the society more easily and gives them access to governing and wealth. In the second level of this knowledge-hierarchy, illiterates attempt to evaluate and compare their own skills to the knowledge that literates have.

In this context the hierarchy in the knowledge system becomes explicit. The devaluation of their skill or knowledge is the major issue for most illiterates. The absence of qualitative acknowledgement of their knowledge places them at the bottom of any social hierarchy.

Researcher: Do you think people respect you for what you do?

Sunita: No, no, no! There is no respect for us or for what we do. Everywhere we go - even on a public bus - everyone calls us servants. I don't like it. But what can we do? Since we never learned to read and write, we have to remain servants.

Here Sunita is justifiably aware of equality she is supposed to receive in a public place. She is aware that the hierarchy is an unfair coercion on the part of the social system. Yet she believes that the knowledge literates possess gives them an intrinsic authority of evaluation.

Researcher: Are you happy with the quality of work that you do?

Raju: Yes. Bouji [the contractor he works for] is happy with my work. He pays me 3 rupees a day.

Researcher: Are you personally happy with your work?

Raju: I don't understand you. If Bouji is happy with my work, I am happy with my work. He is the one who can best evaluate my work.

None of them believe that they are in any personal or social position to evaluate their own knowledge. Even in these interviews, several subjects assumed that there was certain right or wrong answers to the questions asked. They also assumed that the researcher had the power to reprimand them in case they did not answer "correctly."

Nala: Don't ask me that question. I don't know how to answer it.

Researcher: That is fine.

Nala: You will not yell at me?

Researcher: Yell at you? Why would I want to yell at you?

Nala: You know all the correct answers. You can correct me. We [the illiterates] are stupid. We need yelling sometimes so that we can make sense out of things.

This deep fear of social punishment often leads them to believe that what they say or do is not acceptable or measureable in any context.

Along this line, external society's hierarchy and their own class' egalitarianism also promotes a sense of separateness. The following quote raises this issue.

Sunita: I do not belong in your society.

Researcher: Where do you belong?

Sunita: I belong to my society.

Researcher: What is my society?

Sunita: There everyone is equal. No one is servant to another. No one makes fun of you for your clothes or appearance or your skills.

Researcher: Where is this society?

Sunita: Around the neighborhood where I live . . . we [the women] all sit in the evening and watch television. In your society, each of you has a television in your house. We do not. We all go the cinema or bazaar together. We are together much more often than you are.

Nala's "your society" refers to a society of literates. In the above conversation she was making three observations: (a) that her illiterate society was separate and distinct from the literate society; (b) that her society was built on equality and (c) that it (society) was based on an interactional togetherness. While illiterates perceived themselves as equal, literates introduced among themselves (and to others) the hierarchy of intelligence.

Most of the subjects agreed that literates know more than they do and in a position to master the skills they possess.

Raju: Their [literate] mind is sharp. The way I drive this bus is by my common sense. I remember the tree next to the main road where I have to turn. I cannot read the name of the road. If someone cuts that tree tomorrow, I will forget where to turn. They will not forget. They will remember the name.

Chowki: Bouji [his contractor] is more clever. The way he will catch someone stealing from this building will be smarter than the way I would catch a thief. For example, Bouji will call the police, will sign the documents, will talk to the police.

An implicit understanding exists that literates have an intelligence that they themselves lack. Especially for Deepa and Raju, this intelligence is the ability of literates to remember extended amounts of information.

Is there a visible presence of this hierarchical distinction? How does an illiterate identify a literate? How did the majority of subjects know that the researcher was literate though she neither wrote nor read in their presence? The social identifiers are relatively easy.

Nala: Literates always dress clean. They keep their hair oiled [conditioned] and combed back.

Kanha: They always wash their vegetables and fruits before eating them.

Anil: The literates never sit on the floor. They are more comfortable on chairs. I think they cannot fold their legs very well!

Sunita: They care a lot about their physical well-being. Like one of the ladies whom I work for went into labor for her child-birth. She was in the hospital for three whole days! When my sister was born last year, my mother did not go to the hospital at all. I delivered my sister. I think literates are scared of pain. Even a little of it.

These identifiers demarcate the differences between the two societies, both at a level of social and personal behavioral traits. Literates tend to keep themselves clean, and they know the ways to care of their bodies. Thus, bodies become a sign of recognition and separation. Understanding of the body is not limited to mere visible appearance. Though literates keep themselves clean, they may not have stronger bodies. For instance, Sunita refers to the literate's weaker body's inability to bear pain.

Kanha: We do physical work in the field the entire day. That builds our strenght. They [literates] need not do that. They sit at the desk and write. They do not have to lift one ton [about 100 pounds] heavy bags of potatoes every day!

Body has a meaningful significance for them. It provides a framework of a cultural metaphor.

This paper has tried to present an ethnographic view of the cultural and social importance of literacy. Past research has concentrated on several communicative reasons why different people create different social conditions. The knowledge of reading and writing was not directly perceived as the causal connection that leads to such difference of norms. From this research, it would seem that since definitions and categories of knowledge is closely linked to literacy, social understanding is dependent on one's ability to read and write.

The purpose of this research was to move beyond pre-existing observations of illiterate consciousness. This is to provide orality a living cultural frmework. The causal connection I want to stress here is between social

inequality (economical, sartorial and political) and illiteracy. It has often been assumed that social inequality leads to illiteracy or that poor economic conditions discourages an interest in reading and writing. However, the subjects of this research believe that literacy increases social inequality in the sense that literates create hierarchies of intelligence that led to unequal social relationships between those who can read and write and those who cannot. This connection is vital for understanding contemporary orality because of our inability in the recent past to separate modern economic conditions from conditions created by other cultural variables, especially the use of speech.

In this paper, I have tried to analyze that illiterates or contemporary orality find important: (a) knowledge as synonymous with "being skillful"; (b) knowledge as interactional versus manual; and (c) knowledge as hierarchical versus egalitarian. Such ethnographic research or case studies can be developed in various other categories of knowledge, for example the relationship between man and nature; the role of religion; the state and government. However, rethinking the role of literacy is an issue which communication scholars need to address.

Author Notes

These interviews were audio taped in Delhi, India between July 30 and August 17, 1990. The language of conversation was standard Hindi. Only one subject spoke *Haryanwi* which is a local dialect. Translations are by the author. She wishes to thank Ian Angus and Lori A. Paige for their comments and suggestions, as well as Dr. Maya Rao for assistance in data collection.

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